

News Release

Daphne Ecological Services Field Office

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DRAFT ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF CONSERVATION ACTION TO PROTECT ALABAMA BEACH MOUSE RELEASED

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a draft analysis estimating costs related to the conservation of the endangered Alabama beach mouse and its proposed critical habitat at between \$18.3 and \$51.8 million over the next 20 years. In February 2006, the Service proposed to revise and expand an existing critical habitat designation in order to designate a total of 1,326 acres of critical habitat for the species, which is protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In releasing the draft economic analysis, the Service is also reopening the public comment period for the proposed critical habitat designation.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations or protection. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

Areas proposed for critical habitat in this revision include portions of the Fort Morgan State Historic Site and adjacent lands, lands along the right-of-way of Fort Morgan Parkway, lands south of the Alabama Department of Environmental Management's Coastal Construction Control Line, high elevation habitat in the Gulf Highlands area (also known as the multi-family area), and portions of Gulf State Park. The proposed revision includes much of the original designation and higher elevation scrub habitat that the Service now knows is important for the mouse during and after hurricane events. The Service is proposing to exclude the Perdue Unit of the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge from the critical habitat, as well as 50 areas that are covered by incidental take permits under the ESA because of existing conservation plans.

When specifying an area as critical habitat, the ESA requires the Service to consider economic and other relevant impacts of the designation. If the benefits of excluding an area outweigh the

benefits of including it, the Secretary may exclude an area from critical habitat, unless this would result in the extinction of a threatened or endangered species.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection for most listed species, while preventing the agency from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

The cost of designating critical habitat for the Alabama beach mouse is largely associated with residential and commercial development. Those development costs, which are estimated at between \$18.1 million and \$51.2 million, represent more than 98 percent of the total expenditure. Other impacts include the cost associated with transportation, which is estimated to cost between \$0.1 million and \$0.5 million (approximately one percent of estimated costs) for efforts to reduce the impact of road construction and maintenance projects on the mouse. Administrative costs make up less than one percent of the total estimated expenditure.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the ESA, including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for listed species is provided on many of the Service's National Wildlife Refuges, and state wildlife management areas.

Public comments on the draft economic analysis or the proposed revisions to critical habitat will be accepted until September 7, 2006. Written comments and information should be mailed, faxed, or delivered in person to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-Daphne Field Office, Attn: Acting Field Supervisor, 1208-B Main Street, Daphne, Alabama 36526; Fax: 251-441-6222; or sent by electronic mail to: abmcriticalhabitat@fws.gov. Comments previously submitted need not be resubmitted as they will be incorporated into the public record as part of this comment period and will be fully considered in preparation of the final rule.

The Service has scheduled an information session on August 24, from 6 p.m. until 7 p.m., and a public hearing from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., on the proposed critical habitat revision. It will be held at the Gulf Shores Adult Activity Center, 260 Clubhouse Drive, in Gulf Shores, Alabama, 36542.

A complete description of the proposed revision to critical habitat has been published in the Federal Register. Copies of the proposal and maps are available on the Service Internet site at: <http://www.fws.gov/daphne>, or by contacting Rob Tawes, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1208-B Main Street, Daphne, Alabama 36526, telephone: 251-441-5181.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 Ecological Services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.